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Production Design in the Film and Television Space: An Analysis

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Production Design in the Film and Television

Space: An Analysis

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements of the University Honors Program
of Loyola Marymount University

by

Kaitlyn Ryan

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Kaitlyn Ryan

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Production Design in the Film and Television Space: An Analysis

Oftentimes, when we think of our favorite narrative film or television series, the first things that come to mind are the gripping story, the witty dialogue, and the impeccable performances. However, just as important, though often seamless enough to fly under the radar, is the production design and art direction of the film. Production design helps lay the atmospheric foundation, transforming a plain stage into an eighteenth century castle or a 1970s disco and creating a world for the audience to bring themselves into. However, not all production design is necessarily created equal—nor is it meant to be. As I have learned more about the art department, I have noticed that the production design in the average film seems to be more elaborate and extensive than that of television, especially traditional network or cable television shows. While more recent shows such as *Game of Thrones* may have some of the sprawling settings typical to film, that is far from the case in most other beloved shows like *Friends* or *The Big Bang Theory*, which appear to have smaller sets and fewer large design elements. While I had an initial idea as to the reasons for this disparity as well as the consequences of those elements, I wanted to do a deeper investigation into the differences between production design for film and television. After concluding my research, I have found that, indeed, due to the differences in the mediums, the methodologies for doing production design in film and television are necessarily different, as both can fall victim to a number of

disparate constraints and limitations that affect the art department. However, a large part of the difference also comes down to the individual designer, as well as the intentions of the film or TV show. To further explain this conclusion, I will give a brief overview of the history and general methodology of production design as a whole. I will then dive into my research on the subject, which includes scholarly articles and first- and second-hand interviews. I will then conclude with a case study of notable production designers Judy Becker and Ian Phillips.

Film as a medium has been around for over a century, and throughout that time, the art of production design has evolved a considerable amount. Originally, sets were fairly flat and simple; as film became more prominent and sets become more elaborate and artistic, however, the idea of the art department came to be. In 1924, sixty-three art professionals in the film world came together Cinemagundi Club, which was a “social and networking” organization of art directors (Stephens). Later, in 1929—two years after the first Academy Award for Art Direction was awarded—the Art Directors League was formed as a true union for art professionals on film sets, although the Depression largely undercut their efforts (Baugh), although art directors were eventually able to form the more successful Society of Motion Picture Art Directors in 1937 (Stephens). The terminology evolved at this point as well, with Cedric Gibbons and Hans Derier, at MGM and Paramount respectively, being the first to have the title of “supervising art director” (Stephens). In terms of titles and job descriptions, notably absent at this time was the term “production designer.” Up until the end of the 1930s, most of the art work simply fell to the art directors. However, in 1939, an art director named William Cameron Menzies, who had previously won the first Academy Award for Art Direction, began work on *Gone with the Wind*. Trained as a studio artist and illustrator, “his technique was to

sketch out every shot in the movie before filming, which allowed him to create a distinct overall tone and mood to the film, while also giving him more control over the entire production than a typical set designer” (Curtis/Miller). He prioritized cohesion and put an unprecedented amount of work into *Gone with the Wind*, which shows in its elaborate sets and well-put together look. Additionally, he was one of the first to try to work exclusively to scale, rather than using miniatures, as was popular at the time (Miller). For this work and effort, Menzies was the first to be awarded the title of “production designer,” putting him at a rank above all of the art directors that were formerly his peers. Despite this, the term production designer did not become popular until the end of the studio era (Stephens).

The position has continued to evolve and the production designer has become the department head we think of today. Production designers are typically in charge of “set design, painting, decoration, construction, and budgeting” as well as “the incorporation of locations into the overall ‘look’ of a film; decisions about the tone and color of a work’s cinematograph; and special effects” (Stephens). However, even as the job description has settled into what we know today, changes are still being made that affect the production designer’s role in the context of the film professional landscape. For example, it was not until 2000 that television production designers were added to the Society of Motion Picture Art Directors, with the organization being renamed the Art Directors Guild, despite the fact that designers had been working hard in the television space long before that time. Additionally, production designers have increasingly had a role in post-production, due to the increasing presence of CGI and SFX in both film and some television (though to a lesser extent). *Minority Report*’s production designer Alex McDowell was involved in the planning and execution of the film’s CGI in both the

pre- and post- production as “the stages of conception and execution are becoming ever more blurred” (Redvall and Wille). Additionally, new technologies are allowing for a more seamless, less specialized pre-production process, as software is being developed for drafting and model making and some positions in the art department, such as sketch artists, are becoming more accessible and less skill-based (Rohrer). While this may not directly affect the production designers themselves, it does affect the workflow and makeup of the art department, as well as the department’s budgets and its capabilities.

Currently, the production designer’s job begins in pre-production, the phase in which “the designer receives a screenplay and develops a visual concept based on the agreed upon cinematic style” (Redvall and Wille). the average television show, this is five to eight days before shooting and for film, it can be months or years before principle photography is set to begin (Shepard). The first thing to do is to establish the basic rules of the film—tone, mood, color palette, genre, and more. Additionally, it is the time when the “design intensity” is established; that is, it is decided whether the production design will be invisible and every-day, meant to blend in or if it’s meant to attract attention a la *Grand Budapest Hotel* (Redvall and Wille). These discussions, occurring between all of the department heads, are meant to create a cohesive, professional look that will last for the duration of the film as well as outlining department expectations of each other. For film, these meetings may occur many times over the course of pre-production as scripts are changed and notes are given. However, for weekly cable shows, the discussion between department heads must occur in one meeting, generally at the beginning of the week immediately after the script is received (Shepard). After this, “visual research is gathered that depicts the mood or atmosphere that best supports the story.

Assembled, these images become mood boards” which are then “used to reach an agreement with the directors on the direction that the design concept will take” (Salom). The conversations about the mood board, as well as the estimated budget and location list, will inform the items and materials that are used for the final design.

Budget and location are the two other elements most important to the production designer’s preproduction process. While it may not be as exciting as the research elements of pre-production, it is a necessary step that must be completed before the art department can actually begin dressing and building plans. The producer will ask the production designer for a budget estimate and, using their breakdown of the script as well as their past knowledge of how much money certain types of sets will cost. They also must assess which sets must be built versus which can be shot on location. Using these estimates, the designer and producer will then come up with a final budget and location plan (Shepard). Once these things are approved, the art department can begin executing their vision. This includes buying and renting set dressing, choosing construction materials and fabrics, designing and drafting construction plans, and running the specifics by the director and/or producer to make sure the execution is in line with the original intention.

During production, one of the key differences between the art department and the rest of the crew is that the art department is always ahead of the shoot. That means that, while the rest of the crew is shooting that day’s scene or episode, the art department is working on the next set in line to be shot the following day or week. That allows for less wait time, as the sets are prepared by the time the director is ready to shoot (Rohrer). However, the art department and production designer also needs to be aware of what is going on at the actual shoot as well

and be prepared to tackle any problems during shooting, such as a last-minute prop or set change. In post-production, as previously mentioned, the production designer may be involved in the SFX or CGI as it integrates with their practical on-set designs. For example, in *Anna Karenina*, many of the sets were primarily built on a stage with elements added in post-production, such as horses on a stage-built race track (Dawes). These additions require the input of the production designer in order to keep with the original intentions set in place at the initial design meetings.

While the job and duties of a production designer have remained relatively the same in our current era of media production, some differences arise when taking into consideration the mediums of film and television. There are several fundamental disparities that arise from the nature of each medium that affect the production design and can either limit or expand the final product. Before looking at the relationship between the production designer and mediums film and television, we should first look at what the differences in productions methods and allowances are. One of the biggest distinctions is the timetable. In film, pre-production can take anywhere from months to years, with the bulk of the work occurring in four to five months (Ambekar). Similarly, production is completed in around four to six months, and post-production about the same amount of time. Conversely, for a half-hour episode of television, there is generally a five-day turnaround between the crew getting the script to shooting the episode, or a seven or eight-day turnaround for an hour-long episode (Shepard). Because of these constraints, new television sets have less preparation time than sets being built or designed for film. This means that new sets must be scaled down and less permanent than an equivalent film set. That being said, many television shows have central locations that are used

at least once, often multiple times, in every episode. Examples of this would include Monica's apartment in *Friends*, the forensics office in *Bones*, or the hospital in *Grey's Anatomy*. These sets can have a little bit more permanence and detail added, but are still considered to be smaller and less elaborate in scale. This could be due to another general difference between film and television, which is budget. Episode-to-episode, television generally has a smaller budget than those of the typical film, or at least the films with grand, sweeping settings and multiple locations. Simply put, an episode of television has a relatively small budget, which does not allow for many of the elaborate props and custom items that can be used in the typical film (Rohrer). Because new sets and locations are used in each new episode, the more permanent locations have less money allocated and less room for elaborate set pieces.

Another factor is the differing audience expectations of television versus film that goes hand-in-hand with differences in narrative and visual structure. While film has become an "auteur" driven medium where the director (and producers) rule the roost, "in TV, the writer is king" and "dialogue is the most important means to communicate plot, theme and character" (Ryan). This opposes the film production mantra of 'show, don't tell' because, in feature film, "images are expected to carry as much as, if not more, significance than dialogue" (Ryan). In short, traditional television viewers are conditioned to expect sharp, witty dialogue that is the focus of the narrative while film viewers will expect grand visual moments that tell the story. These conventions point the attentions of the audience. And, while television is becoming more cinematic with shows like *Game of Thrones*, this is still the general trend. The difference in emphasis allows for more variation of shot size in film. Television tends to use medium to wide shots, while film "allows for a greater variation in shot size and depth staging," with extreme

wide shots to extreme close ups and everything in between (Ryan). This affects the art department in that there is less attention directed toward the sets in television, because the focus is on the dialogue, not the visual landscape. Conversely, the sets and locations in a film are on display because of the visual emphasis. Inserts focus on pieces of set dressing and extreme wide shots show the entirety of a space. The viewer's eye, whether they are aware of it or not, is reading the screen, which includes the set dressing. Conversely, a television production designer does not need to worry about the hyper-awareness on visual elements, as television encourages viewers to hone in on the dialogue and story elements. As such, they are not as attuned to the contents of the frame, including the production design, unless the writers use dialogue to specifically point a design element out.

These disparities may seem drastic, but, in fact, the practical applications as seen on the screen can be subtler than expected and can only be truly seen through careful examination as well as background research. In order to evaluate these differences, then, we must independently look at an example of each and examine it with regard for the constraints of specific to the mediums. In the television space, I will be doing a case study of designer Ian Phillips and his work on the hit show *Parks and Recreation*. For film, I will be looking at designer Judy Becker and her work in *American Hustle*. These works are among the most prominent for each respective designer and are appropriately indicative of each designer's overall style and methodology. As such, doing these case studies will provide a little more insight into the specific necessities and limitations of each medium.

In addition to *Parks and Recreation*, Ian Phillips has done production design and art department work for *Splitting Up Together*, *The Good Place*, and a few episodes of *Brooklyn*

Nine-Nine (IMDb). He started out working smaller jobs in the art department, starting out doing graphics on a film called *Material Girl* (which got him into the union), during which he was asked what he wanted to do with his career. When he realized he wanted to work in the art department and become a production designer, those on the set who took an interest in him bumped him up to be an assistant art director (Wannop). From there he progressed, working as an art director on a few episodes *Bones* and *Lincoln Heights* as well as on the first *Twilight* film before becoming a full-fledged production designer in around 2011 (IMDb). He has also been nominated for an Art Directors Guild award for his work on *The Good Place* (2019) and won a Satellite Award for *A Single Man*.

In looking at his projects and work as a production designer, it is clear that Phillips generally leans toward the half-hour comedic television space—five out of Phillips' six television production design credits are for half-hour shows, with one fifty-minute runtime show, and all are comedies (IMDb). In terms of his overall style, he works to weave the comedy into the visual design, in the hopes that it will add another layer to the written jokes. He states:

with comedy, the driving force is to get people to really see how funny the joke can be, because it's only on screen for a short period of time...in comedy, that's really what you want—to be able to tell as many jokes as possible in as little time and have people respond to those jokes (Berkowitz).

In terms of *Parks and Recreation*, one of the signature ways Phillips found to convey visual comedies was through the use of paintings and murals. These murals, which Phillips designs

and creates with the help of his team, display the odd and often violent history of the fictional town of Pawnee, Indiana. For example, in the episode “94 Meetings,” the character Leslie Knope talks about a beautiful, historic wedding ceremony documenting a Native American marrying a white woman. Indeed, the mural initially seems to showcase a couple standing under a gazebo, in a peaceful ceremony. However, the camera then zooms out to reveal that the mural also shows the warring factions of the white men and the Native Americans, shooting at each other in a violent spectacle (Berkowitz). It is through structural and design elements such as this that Phillips is able to use these murals to reveal the jokes.

These now-famous murals have become more and more prominent as the seasons have progressed, and “the increased attention the paintings have generated has spurred Phillips and his crew to create more of them” (Berkowitz). This is an element of television; production design plans can change based on evolving fan demands and expectations of the series, which is an element that films rarely have to contend with. In order to keep up with this demand in the condensed timeline of episodic television, some compromises have to be made. For instance, the paintings are designed to look like they were done in the 1930s. However, the paintings are done with acrylic paint rather than the historically-accurate oil paints because “oils just take too long to dry” and “if you look really closely, you can see the canvas weave” (Berkowitz). However, as previously stated, television is not primarily focused on the visuals. So, while in a film the barely visible canvas weave might be incredibly distracting in close-ups and other shots of the painting, in *Parks and Recreation*, the viewer is not made to notice it, because they are focused on the joke—the script is brought to the forefront of the viewer’s attention rather than a potentially distracting visual inconsistency.

These murals are not the only unique production design element in *Parks and Recreation*. Many of the jokes come through in the form of props as well. Being temporary, these props are easier to manage in the short time span, cost less than a big set piece, and get the joke across quickly and efficiently. Some of the more memorable props include character Ron Swanson's barbeque tool pouch (a tool belt that held his prized barbeque grilling tools), a 512-ounce soda cup, and a children's book called "Groffle the Awful Waffle" (Perello). While many of the props were small and easy to fabricate, some took much more ingenuity and resourcefulness. Property master Gay Perello has recounted the time she was asked to build the 512-ounce soda cup and was running out of time and money to call a custom mold maker. However, eventually Phillips came up with the idea to stack and paint two large buckets on top of each other to make what looked like a giant cup (Perello). In short, because they lacked the time and budget to sculpt a brand-new cup, Phillips was forced to think on his feet and use less than glamorous materials to fabricate this prop. In examining Phillips' work on *Parks and Recreation*, that is basically what it boils down to—he works hard to communicate the joke to the best of his ability while also adhering to the production conventions and limitations of television. If he had unlimited time and budget, Phillips might be able to put forth elaborate and impeccable props, but he is aware that the audience is tuned in to the comedic writing and timing, so that is what he focuses on as well, making him an aware and a talented television production designer.

Now, we will be looking at the work of Judy Becker, focusing on the film *American Hustle*. Judy Becker primarily works on feature films and has designed films such as *The Fighter*, *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, *Joy*, and *Carol*. Becker has been working as a production designer

since 1998 and has art department credits dating back to 1990 (IMDb). Her films tend to be historical, ranging from the 1950s to the 1990s—she said in an interview that she had worked in basically every time period after World War II (Nathaniel R.). She is also a frequent collaborator of David O. Russell's, having worked with him on five separate occasions (IMDb). Becker's foray into the art department came from her love of drawing as a child, when she would draw "pages and pages of imaginary interiors, collections of objects and fashion wardrobes" (Becker). Since then, she has become one of the most prominent working production designers, having been nominated for an Academy Award for her work in *American Hustle*, as well as six nominations and one win from the Art Directors Guild.

Judy Becker's style, while generally being inspired by whatever historical period she is working in, also comes from Judy's personal tastes in the world of fine arts and the world around her. She details a time she spoke to a production design class of graduate students. She began the session by asking each student "to name a favorite artist, photographer or architect" and "was surprised...when almost everybody was unable to answer the question without a great deal of hesitation and thinking and that when they did answer, the favorites were so generic as to be a litany of dorm room posters" (Becker). She has often claimed her love for art and said that this love of art has strongly contributed to her design sensibilities and aesthetic.

This passion for art and design is evident in the design of *American Hustle*. The subject matter is already predisposed to an artistic interpretation; "because the characters are running a con, but also who they are pretending and aspiring to be" (Hornik). Additionally, she has the opulent and often over-the-top setting of the 1970s to work with, adding a new level of inspiration to her designs. However, she also expresses her desire to "give them a world that

was true to their characters and to New York in that period, but still believable,” not extending beyond the realm of reality (Blum). In fact, in many of her interviews, Becker talks about the extensive research and different inspirations she took into account when designing the film. For example, in one interview she details some of the movies that inspired her, including *Atlantic City*, *The King of Comedy*, and *Taxi Driver* (Blum). The level of inspiration and care taken into account by Becker is quite common in film; as previously stated, research boards take up a large portion of the preproduction process. Even the color palette was chosen with regard to the era. She “wanted to work with a color palette that was true to the era but not clichéd” like the typical “rust, mustard, and avocado,” instead going “with gold, blue, metallic and brown” (Blum). This high attention to research no doubt led to the immersive world the film presents of a glamorous 1978 New York, and is made possible by the high budget and extended schedule of the film.

One specific element that also shows the care and consideration that Becker put into the visual elements of the film is the “contrast between Sydney’s (played by Amy Adams) sophisticated New York apartment and Rosalyn’s (Jennifer Lawrence) over-the-top Long Island home” (Hornik). Sydney, a former stripper-turned-successful conwoman, is minimal, full of gold and white detailing. It feels like an expensive apartment, yet is tasteful. Conversely, Rosalyn’s home is over-the-top, with patterned wallpaper and tacky, ‘70s décor, because “the character is a stay-at-home mom and a housewife, a woman who clearly enjoys decorating and maybe enjoys decorating too much” (Hornik). Aside from just different aesthetics, Becker paid attention to creating an odd cohesion of sorts between the two spaces—“where Rosalyn had gold, Sydney has a sunny yellow; where Rosalyn has wallpaper Sydney has a neutral grasscloth”

(Hornik). By “using similar palettes, textures and materials, but completely different taste levels,” Becker was able to create a deliberate contrast between these two characters (Hornik). In fact, it is a contrast that is designed to be interpreted by the audience through the visuals alone, the most important convention of film. A viewer can, within seconds, see who these two women are without even listening to the dialog or following the story. Similarly, Irving (played by Christian Bale), who is another conman, has an office befitting of his character and his profession. The “designer pieces [of furniture] were really beat up and the desk was a little too big for the office,” which shows “how Irv wants to be someone else, but this is who he is, in this seedy office with this battered furniture” (Blum). Becker has herself professed that she is “very character driven as a production designer,” and her attention to character detail shows. The fact that she is working with the freedom of big-budget cinema allows her to fully explore characters and communicate them to the audience visually, essentially creating a second, visual story on the screen that vitally supplements and supports the script.

In looking at these two examples of production design in television and film, respectively, it is evident that the differing constraints and allowances I have mentioned previously factor into the final outcome of the design. Certain elements are highlighted while others may be more easily hidden or ignored. I was able to explore some of these constraints in my own production design, working on student film sets. Both had budget constraints, which ended up unfolding in vastly different ways. The first project, a graduate thesis, was a short television proof-of-concept, with a script that was about five pages long. By the time the script was locked, I had four locations to design; an exterior and interior of an abandoned building, an abandoned warehouse used for drug trafficking, and a military officer’s office. Additionally, the

film was a period piece, set in 1950s Saigon. I had a larger budget than I was typically used to working with, but because I was building the office on the stage, I knew right away that most of the budget was going to have to go there. Additionally, the director began asking for more and more detailing, such as crown molding, to give the office a realistic feeling, and it very quickly seemed like the building materials would cause us to go over budget. However, thinking back to the fact that it was to be only four to five minutes long, and only a short portion of it was to be in the office, I began picking elements to cut and prioritizing which design items were of the greatest importance and which were expendable. I learned the budget limitations that can come from a custom-built set and can see how television shows must carefully account for the most vital elements, sometimes letting other elements go.

I used this knowledge for my second production design project, when the director asked if I could build a nightclub on the film stage for his film, a 1980's period piece set in San Francisco. I drafted a basic estimate cost of building and he quickly determined that it was far out of his budget. Looking for another on-campus location was also unsuccessful, as many of them had been used in other student films and would also be expensive to turn into convincing-looking nightclubs. Eventually, we found an actual nightclub that would let us shoot there—for \$500 per half hour. However, it perfectly fit the look we were going for, and would require very little additional set dressing. After exploring other leads, we determined this to be the best option for both the budget and the look of the film and the director spend the vast majority of his budget on the location, leaving very little for the additional apartment location. I convinced the director to remove the period piece element, and setting it in the modern day allowed us to use the existing furniture in the apartment we shot in. In the end, the nightclub ended up

looking great and, while the apartment was fairly simple, it served the purpose it needed to. I wish we would have had a little more money left from the nightclub, but I knew that the club was the first location of the film and would need to leave a good impression. This was another experience in which I learned a vast amount about budgeting and prioritizing in the context of production design and will keep these lessons in mind as I continue my career.

While film was once deemed irrevocably superior to television, the recent boom of television, largely due to HBO and streaming, has rendered this no longer the case. In fact, critics, filmmakers, and scholars go back and forth on whether television or film is the better medium. However, perhaps professor Shanie Latham put it best, saying that “comparing television to film is a little like comparing a short story to a novel; they may seem like similar art forms, but the reality of the constraints placed on each means that the measure for quality in one may not be the same for the other” (Symposium). This same sentiment can be scaled down and applied to the production design of film and television. The differences can be compared, but perhaps the better way to look at it is that each methodology of production design is best constructed to best serve the needs of the medium. Television can be quicker and focus intimately on a few elements, such as props or set pieces, that are vital to the script, as that is the focus of television. Film, however, is designed to look at the script as a big picture, and the production designer must figure out how to tell their own story that is effectively independent of the spoken dialogue. Additionally, a large part of both the methodology and the final result rests on the individual production designer. As previously explored, Ian Phillips is focused on comedy and joke-building and, as a result, that is his focus in his work. Similarly, Judy Becker finds that her love of art and travel inspires her work, as does her love of character. In short,

while the medium dictates the end result, so does the particularities of the production designer. As such, the work of an expert production designer can be seen as both transcending the medium and working with it.

Appendix 1: An Interview with Rich Rohrer

Rich: [00:00](#) I'm doing pretty well, you know, keep busy.

Kaitlyn: [00:04](#) Yeah, yeah, I understand that. Yeah. Thank you. Yeah, I was just going to say thank you again so much for agreeing to interview with me for my thesis. We have to do informational interviews with professionals in the field of our choosing and I'm choosing to study production design and the whole art department. So, uh, thank you again.

Rich: [00:27](#) Fantastic. Love it.

Kaitlyn: [00:29](#) So I'll just start firing some questions at you if that's okay.

Rich: [00:34](#) Yeah, please. Perfect.

Kaitlyn: [00:36](#) Um, so my first question is just how did you get into the whole art direction, Art Department field?

Rich: [00:46](#) Uh, let's see. Well, uh, first you have to, uh, study the film business and TV business and decide where you want to go. Right? So that was, uh, in college for me, I was doing all of the different film related crew positions and then I was asked to do a film on the, uh, the film stays and build a set and it, that's where I was the happiest, right? Which is the best experience. And, you know, I've been creative all my life and did, uh, art and painting and sketching and everything, so it kind of fell right in. So, so I said, well, I, I would like to do this as a career. So when I was a senior, I interned at a, on a film at Sony and Culver City, uh, in their arts department, or I met, uh, three or four different, uh, other art directors and other folks, other crew members in the art department over there.

Rich: [01:48](#) And so I, at the end of my, uh, college, when I graduated, I handed my resume out to just about everybody I could, yeah. Looking to be a production assistant, you know, and the art department. So, and then I was fortunate enough, uh, to get, um, to a, a TV show for Fox as an art department Production Assistant. And I jumped in there and I worked there for three years, I think on that show. It was a pretty successful show. And I, I really learned so much on, on that, that project because, uh, I had to do so much for that show and the art department. Yeah. So designing graphics, designing, all that stuff. So, uh, that's kind of where I started. And you know, I was fortunate that it was at Sony in Culver City for those three years. So I was

able to start it to stay on the sort of west side area. Yeah. And as you work, do you meet other people? Right. You meet other crew members, they meet other producers and, and you just kind of start building a knowledge base of people, you know? And I worked hard and I was always there on time and I always had a great attitude and I was nice to everybody. And you know, being nice to everybody is like 60% of being so successful in the business, you know, just weren't working well with others. So, and that's kind of where it started. Right. Does that answer your question?

Kaitlyn: [03:27](#)

No, that was perfect. No, that was great.

Rich: [03:31](#)

Um, um, one, one like finished snow on that, uh, the production that I was on as Sony, after those three years, they, they kind of, uh, rewarded me for working so much and so hard. And they, they got, they wrote the letters to the art director's Guild Union to get me to be in the union. So that was kind of the answer to that, which was great. Cause then if you can get a into the art director's guild and their union, that opens up a lot more possibilities for work for position and the art department for sort of a career building experience. So, yeah. Okay. That's that little cap to that question.

Kaitlyn: [04:17](#)

Yeah, no, that's awesome. Um, I guess my followup to that would say, I would ask, um, how have you seen kind of the,

Rich: [04:26](#)

okay,

Kaitlyn: [04:26](#)

the whole art department and just, um, everything having to do with production design in general. How have you seen that change from when you started in the business up until now in your last couple of jobs and what you're teaching now to your students?

Rich: [04:45](#)

How it's changed and developed? It's a good question. Uh, well what I started and I was younger and I was working, uh, there was a little digital integration, just a little, I was sort of at the very beginning. Um, you know, some arts departments have one person who was a computer and they might be designing something on it. I'm not sure with what program, you know, early stages of things. Um, I remember, uh, doing some graphics on this program called Cork, if that even exists anymore. I Dunno. And I only did it because somebody in the office had a computer and they have to have that program. This was in 95, 96, 1995, 96. Um, so you kind of started doing a little digital work, but it wasn't for another three or four years before or sort

of digital artwork were, was generated, was used to as presentation tools, a set design tools.

- Rich: [06:05](#) All of those kinds of integrations were sort of slower then. Yeah. Um, and as time went by, that was integrated of course, more and more, uh, in the art department and how you present ideas, you know, you, you hire illustrators to, to do a nice ink sketch, rendering color rendering of your set, uh, back then, and you rely on their, their artistic talent with a pencil and a pen. Yeah. And then it kind of transformed into these digital illustrators, uh, where they can use, you know, one of a dozen design programs to express the same ideas, same illustration, and you presented the same way. Uh, it's just looks more fancy now. Right? Yeah. You know, so I, I think it's that part of it's changed in terms of technology. Um, the bones of it are still there. You know, you still have to design something.
- Rich: [07:09](#) Well, you have to design something that's big. You have educated yourself about, you still have to pick colors and textures that make sense, uh, for your project. Yeah. And uh, you know, whether the outcome is carpenters with wood and paint and painters or it's digital artists sitting at a computer designing or putting together the 3-D environments. So it's really, you know, it's, in one sense it hasn't changed because if you're a designer, you still need vision and creativity and a depth of understanding of character and story and how color and texture works. But then you also sort of need this newer kind of way to express all that with digital technology and computer applications that will get your idea out of your head and into, you know, reality. So, you know, you can do this the most amazing sketchup drawing, but if it costs too much, then, then that's just a practice sketchup drawing. Yeah. You know what I mean? Yeah, exactly. Um, and then the script changes overnight and we start over. So it's, there's always that possibility. Yeah. You know, so I, I guess if I've answered your question, I'm, how it's changed. I think, you know, in terms of the, the digital integration, I think,
- Kaitlyn: [08:46](#) yeah, that, that makes a lot of sense. Um, so everything's just become so programmed and automated and there's a lot, a lot you can do on a computer.
- Rich: [08:57](#) Yeah. And, you know, bigger arts departments with multiple crew, you hire one person just to organize the digital, uh, the digital universe around the art department and that, and sometimes that's, that's how the workflow is. If you have a large art department of 12 or 15 people, you need somebody just to digitally organize everything and put everything on the server

and the proper place. Yeah. So everybody can access are all the right files at the right time. And so it's all of all of that sort of integration. Yeah. Know. But if you have an art department have to then you just talk kind of just one person deals with it. Yeah. Pass around the flash drive in the room, but you know, save files and keep moving. So yeah.

Kaitlyn: [09:46](#)

Cool. So, um, my next question then is, um, typically what is your role in the art department and what does that mean for your day to day job in pre production and production?

Rich: [10:00](#)

Well, uh, as an art director, uh, at least what I'm doing now, would that be best answered or I do it as, yeah. Okay. My main focus in pre production is to get

Rich: [10:22](#)

All the information together, uh, so that we can come up with a budget. That's our first sort of goal. Uh, and usually that means construction drawings of everything. We've got to build a, that needs getting cost estimates for materials, backdrops, greens, any kind of rental pieces, uh, anything that has to be manufactured, any materials as putting together a solid budget so that we know what we're going into, uh, the clean myself and the production designer if I'm working for them. While that's happening, the creativity is also happening where your designs floor plans and you're pulling research materials to, uh, kind of get a good understanding of what each set's going to be. A grouping that all together so that you can then prove, do a good presentation of your sets to a, he's a producer or director or that work, whoever needs to see it.

Rich: [11:30](#)

So, so all preproduction-- It's like all about doing those two things. You're presenting all of your ideas so that they approve them and then they're also getting up a budget for that so that the line producer or UPM can, can have that information because that they're going to want that really quick. Okay. Yeah. So that's pre production. And then if, if the, uh, your presentation goes well and they like everything and then your budget comes in at a cost that's approved, then you can move forward. You can start building, you can start renting, you can start purchasing, uh, everything. And you can start building sets and, and just sort of moving forward. And that's all that preproduction work. So you make sure the painters give paint samples and you approve that

Rich: [12:25](#)

you make sure construction is, has all of the documents they need, but build a set and that, that, do you do a stage plan so everybody knows where the sets are going to be? Yeah. And so there's all of that happening. And then as you're, as you're going

on location that you go on the location scouts and you, you build a design and I budget for the locations and that's part of it too. And daily, that's your, that's your work. You just, it's solving little problems. It's, it's designing little projects and overseeing the construction and it's drawing some signage and it's

Rich: [13:05](#) drawing the detail of maybe a fireplace or a cabinet that you have to do. And I was all of those little, little projects that sort of happened during the day. And then there's logistically of organizing everything. So certain things get done at the right time based on when you shoot and renting things, uh, at the right time. So the cost is only a one week rental. So you rented at the right time and you coordinate getting rentals to the stage. And how was that? And it's also distributing information. You're, you're constantly making plans and floor plans and emailing them out now and making sure everybody's on board about exactly what's happening. So, and then you have a production meeting and then you're into production. So, and with the art department, you're always ahead of the shooting crew, you know, at least by a day or two days or three days, right? Yeah. So you're prepping one day and they're shooting, what do you prepped yesterday? So it's that kind of process while they're shooting.

Rich: [14:11](#) Cool. Um, there's more, probably enough.

Kaitlyn: [14:16](#) Oh, no, no. If there's more please.

Rich: [14:20](#) That's probably it. I'm not sure that question.

Kaitlyn: [14:24](#) Um, well I was going to ask you to, um, you primarily do, um, I work in television, correct?

Rich: [14:33](#) Yes. Uh, that's been what I've been doing for the past 10 years or so, uh, which has been great because it allows me a couple things. It allows me a pretty secure schedule, uh, and TV shows last a little than teachers he'd given time. And for the most part I am here in town. So I'm able to, uh, to teach as well. Yeah. I was working on features. I might be out of town for months at a time, then I wouldn't be able to do that. So yeah.

Kaitlyn: [15:12](#) Yeah. So, um, because my, my project is, my research you project for the semester is primarily on looking at the differences between, um, methodology between production, designing for television and for films. I wanted to ask you, um, if you've done any features or anything, what has, have you seen as the biggest differences in how you've had to work or how

you've had to see people work in TV versus film in production design,

Rich: [15:44](#)

right. Uh, there are differences. Yes. And there are similarities as well. One of the big differences is pace. Uh, with television you get a script and you have a couple of weeks to prep it because it's episodic and, and the taste is quick. So we design quick, you present quick and you start building. So you can keep going to the next script, the next episode, and you're designing quickly. And there's, and there's, there's always changes and last minute additions and all that where the feature film, there are changes to the script of course, but timeframe is a little bit longer. Um, you have the script earlier, you have more time to prep sets that you are designing for that film. Um, you have more time to develop them, to get costs for them to build them. And then once that's

Kaitlyn: [16:59](#)

okay,

Rich: [17:00](#)

that process is done, then you, you build and then shoot it. And there's, you're talking about weeks and months as opposed to days. Does that make sense? So there's a little more time there. And depending on the kind of feature, there's a little more money to so, and with feature films, the design you do are one of a kind. Uh, let me just elaborate on what that means. It's kind of, it's designed for that specific film for that specific moment. So the construction materials can be a little bit more, um, what's the word I'm trying to say a little more.

Kaitlyn: [17:46](#)

Yeah.

Rich: [17:46](#)

Uh, what's the word? I guess a little more less temporary. Like, like you can do some work with some of the materials that can be a little more expensive or take a little more time to put together or to construct. Uh, because it becomes very specific. And television, you usually don't have that kind of time to put something together like that. Maybe I'm trying to say that possibly. Yeah. I think that point kind of comes across, um, as far as size of our departments that are about the same. Um, can be the same depending on the size of the film, or size of the television show. Uh, but it really is the amount of time you have to prep. I think is, is really a key, key part of it.

Kaitlyn: [18:48](#)

Yeah. That, that makes a lot of sense.

Rich: [18:50](#)

You know, um, on, on television, sometimes you have, you get a script and you have three days to develop a set and then one

day that presented and then you got to build it and, and they'd go quickly. You know, a set for a feature has been in the script for a while and there it is. And so you can develop it and develop it and then build it and over weeks and you know that the schedule is the schedule so that you can work yourself back into when you're shooting it.

Kaitlyn: [19:23](#)

Okay. That makes sense.

Rich: [19:25](#)

Yeah. Okay.

Kaitlyn: [19:27](#)

Um, locations wise, is there between features and television, is one medium more conducive for building while the is more conducive for shooting on location or does it just depend on the project?

Rich: [19:41](#)

Uh, it really depends on the project, you know, um, both, both mediums go out on location and also shoot on stage. Um, but I will say this, what features they, they can, they can

Kaitlyn: [20:02](#)

okay.

Rich: [20:02](#)

Expand their location selection a little bit more than television. Okay. Not to say there's some television shows that they go all over the world and shoot, you know, there's a handful that can do that. Yeah. Um, well for the most part it's you're shooting episodic television. You kind of have to stay sort of around, uh, your stages. But, uh, sometimes you can go one big trip up to another city to shoot a bunch of stuff that will appear in multiple episodes. I've done that before. Okay. Uh, but for the most part, they, you know, you're on a schedule and you got to shoot the basic sets that are on a stage and Sony, anybody, you'd have, you know, two days and location work and you can't send your crew to Diego for those two days because it kills your schedule. You've gotta be back tomorrow.

Rich: [20:58](#)

I'm back on stage because the schedule is so fast paced. So you do go on location quite a bit, but you don't go very far. Okay. Uh, probably in that 30 mile zone. Yeah. It's usually where they like to go because it's cost effective. As soon as you take a crew of beyond that 30 mile zone, everybody gets a hotel room, everybody gets transportation and everybody gets immediate, like three meals and the cost just goes way up. So no, or the scene cheer and you build that in you saying we got to go to Italy, so we're going to go to Venice and we got to go there. So then you build it in the budget, a big trip to Italy to get higher Italian crew and you shoot those two weeks there and then you

fly to Australia and shoot those two weeks, you know, so it's different location work that makes an actually go do that. If we had to do that here and on TV show, we would find a place that looks like it'll leave me, go to Venice beach and, and the Venice canals and switch outside and just don't like Italy and yeah. You know, that kind of thing. Yes. We got to shoot in a day. So you know, that kind of difference.

Kaitlyn: [22:08](#)

So when you're looking for new projects or in the past when you've been looking for new projects, what are the things that you look for? What are, what's something that makes you excited about a project or want to pick up a project versus something that would make you turn something down?

Rich: [22:28](#)

Uh, let's see.

Rich: [22:33](#)

the people is probably the most important. Whoever you're working with. Uh, who are the other members of the art department who, uh, is the producer who is a director of photography and, uh, those considerations are, are very important, like the content. Uh, of course it's best scenario. We'd always want to choose amazing content, amazing stories, amazing scripts. And there are a few out there that can do that. You know, you can choose the right project they want to work with. Well, for the most part is I want to work with this director. I want to work with this designer, I want to do this and this. And, and then the script follows. Okay. Then you make the sets in the script and the sets and, and, um, and the design of the, of the script. And the story, the the next point. So sometimes you don't really have it, you never really have a choice. Uh, it's, I'm going to get hired on this project cause I, I really liked the people and then, then they'll send me the script and then just work with it. You know, most people are not in the position and reading a script and going, ah, it's, I don't really like the script, so I'm not going to take the job. Okay. So most people can't do that because then they'll be sitting at home without work. Yeah. So,

Kaitlyn: [24:02](#)

yeah. So it's kind of circles back to that. It's all about who you know, sort of thing.

Rich: [24:07](#)

Yeah. It's all about who you know and who you like to work with, you know. Um, that's, that's a lot of a lot. Um, part of it too, you know.

Kaitlyn: [24:17](#)

Um, what's what, um, I would, I have two more questions. Um, okay. The next one is, um, what is your favorite part about working in the art department? Like what is your favorite part?

Just like either more general or like you really liked building or what, what's your favorite part of the process?

Rich: [24:43](#)

Uh, let's see. I really like,

Rich: [24:53](#)

When you're in the middle of the build and you are on stage or in the middle where they're building it and you're discussing it and, and there's plaster being put on and there's some walls that have been painted, but it's not yet in some, there's some carpenters, they're building something and all of that is what you drew or you designed and they're starting to, they're getting a, I'll say 50, 60% of it done and it's being built. It's like the most exciting part to me because I seen, you know, our vision sort of becoming reality. Yeah. And uh, that, that's very exciting to me. That part of it. Um, I do like graphics and design and graphics. That's always something I enjoy as well. Um, and then I joined the people too. So it was kind of those three, those three things, you know, to kind of come together. Yeah. That process of the bills, which is very exciting. I always like to see it come together. So

Kaitlyn: [25:59](#)

very cool. Um, and then my last question is, as you watch TV or movies, what are things about the production design and the set decoration that, that you tend to notice or be critical of or kind of jump forward in your mind? Because I know now that I've, you know, taken your class and like done even student films, I'll be watching a movie or a TV show and notice things in the background that I don't think I would have noticed otherwise.

Rich: [26:29](#)

Yeah, yeah. You, you tend to do that when you look at, look at what you see. Um, I tend to recognize a lot of locations and I recognize a lot of the back lots on that. And then I see how they changed it, right. To make it for their show or their film. Yeah. I still, I still recognize it and I see that a commercials too, you know? Um, but for the most part, when I watch a show or I go see a movie, I, I, I really try to put all that in the back of my head. And just really enjoy it, you know? Uh, and just take it all in and see and get a sense of the design. Uh, and as, as the project, as a film or TV show progresses, I either sort of sort of lean towards, oh, this is looking great, this is looking great. Or then I go the other way and I go, oh shoot, look at that. That's wrong. You know? And then once I do, once I hit that kind of area in my mind about what I'm looking at, then it's takes me out of the show, unfortunately. You know? But, uh, so many talented people out there, uh, designers that are really doing some wonderful things, most of them, most of the time you just

get engulfed in the story. Yeah. The look is fantastic, you know? Yeah. So.

- Kaitlyn: [27:59](#) Awesome. Well that wraps up all of my, my questions that I have for you. Thank you again so much for taking the time out of your schedule to interview with me. I really appreciate it.
- Rich: [28:13](#) Oh, my pleasure. Anytime. I'm glad you called. Yeah, it was. I always enjoy doing this. It's really nice.
- Kaitlyn: [28:21](#) Yeah. Well, it's definitely helpful to get to hear different perspectives and different, um, different angles on the industry in general, and especially getting to hear from somebody in who's worked in the art department and in television. Um, it's, it's really cool to hear your, your perspective on it..
- Rich: [28:47](#) Awesome. Great. Yeah, so I answered everything. Yes. Okay. Awesome. And if you think of anything else or you need to touch base with me again, please do.
- Kaitlyn: [29:01](#) Yeah. Perfect. Thank you. Thank you so much for this and all of your help with everything and, um, I'll definitely be in touch with, uh, if I have any more questions in the future.
- Rich: [29:12](#) Okay. Thanks, Kaitlyn.
- Kaitlyn: [29:13](#) Awesome. Have a good day.
- Rich: [29:15](#) All right. You too. Bye. Bye.

Appendix 2: An Interview with Maxine Shepard

1. How did you get into the field of production design?
 - a. Went to school for graphic design but was basically done with her studies by her junior year
 - b. Tried a few film production classes and fell in love with the industry and production design
 - c. After graduation, the only person she knew in the industry was her mom's hairdresser, who had done hair for a few Hollywood productions, who helped get her in the door
 - d. Mainly just sent her resume out and started working on low or no budget productions with little to no pay
 - e. There was no course in production design at her school, so she was forced to learn by doing in the field
 - f. Worked a lot of "art director" jobs on small sets where she was doing everything from construction to buying to painting
 - g. Saw *Chinatown* as a kid and was fascinated by the way production design could transform the setting into 1930s Los Angeles
2. What is your day-to-day/week in the art department?
 - a. Typical day is getting the script, breaking it down, going over new sets and approach, doing research and coming up with a game plan
 - b. Picking out specifics in the script and using those to design and sketch the space based on the movements in the scene
 - c. Show final sketches to the producer first, then the director of the episode for approval
 - d. At the beginning of the week, there is a concept meeting with all of the departments, where everyone goes over the script, talks about ideas, and gets feedback
 - e. Half hour show generally has five-day turnaround (seven or eight-day for hour long show like CSI)
 - f. Week flow: location meeting -> concept meeting -> art department meeting -> location scout -> production meeting -> everything is finished on Friday
3. What is the difference between working in TV versus film?
 - a. TV is a much faster pace, five to eight-day turnaround
 - b. It's hard to get bored in TV, always surprises and challenges
 - c. Features allow for a deeper dive and take much longer
 - d. Features can be more rewarding
 - e. Once you start working in TV, you kind of get "stuck" and producers start only looking at you as a TV designer, harder to move back to features
 - f. Ultimately, choosing a project is more about the people/crew, the script, and the subject
4. How has the industry changed since you started your career?
 - a. Started working in the 80s, computers were new and not used as much, now computers are omnipresent in the film industry and the design world

- b. Carries iPad around with her all the time
 - c. Almost everything (sketching, measuring, research) is done digitally
 - d. Everything moves faster and things can be saved and duplicated more easily
 - e. People expect things to be done faster because of the use of digital, ask for more to be done more quickly
 - f. Forces you not to second guess and rely on your instincts, do quick research before making decisions
5. What are the biggest challenges when starting a new project?
- a. Producers need to know staffing stage/set sizes, timelines, initial concept ideas right off the bat without knowing exactly what you're doing
 - b. Guessing the important details and logistics based on past knowledge and other opinions
 - c. Important to know who to call to get opinions and gather information
 - d. Research is the most fun part of the job
 - e. Job is a compromise between art and business – it is called showBUSINESS

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